

The Interview  
Katie Pye, artist, designer

## Art on her sleeve

Its interesting how original people can make everything in a 1 km radius seem bland and colourless.

Such is the case of clothes designer and artist Katie Pye. She strides into a Paddington cafe where we are to talk. Old bleaches the place with her vibrance and her linguistic gymnastics. In the old days they used to call it a "presence".

"Before we start, I must eat—something formidable," she says, and examines the menu with fierce attention. She audibly deliberates, before alighting on the Caesar salad. "You don't mind sitting on that side of the table, do you? Good."

Pye inhabits that rare terrain between clothes design and art. Her "pieces" have been described as "wearable art", and she's been collected by the Australian National Gallery, the National Gallery of Victoria, and Sydney's Powerhouse Museum.

After a long self-imposed exile from directly retailing her extraordinary work, she has just opened a store in Paddington. To step into it is to enter at least a corner of Pye's vibrant imagination.

Like most complex and creative people, her story is a long one.

"I was born in Sydney and brought up in Lane Cove, on the river," she says. "I spent a lot of time eyeing off the footballers from the local school. My first fashion decisions, when I was 13 or 14, were what to wear to the next game."

Her mother taught her to sew when she was eight. But young Pye also was drawn to art and painting. She fell in love with the works of Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd, Lloyd Rees, William Dobell and a host of others, and went on to study at the East Sydney Technical College.

"It was very disappointing," she says. "Too much alcohol and drugs. It was the '70s. They were throwing everything out, teaching technique. They said do what you want to do."

"I had a teacher who actually said to me — 'Why do you bother painting?' You know you're just going to get married and be a housewife'. I thought I'd find like-

with  
**Matt Condon**

minded people there, but there was not the philosophical debate I was looking for."

Pye quickly became part of that great creative flux of Sydney in the '70s — the writers of the "Balmain ghetto", painters, filmmakers, the Yellow House at the Cross.

In 1977 Pye opened her first store — Duzzn't Madder — in bohemian Balmain. It was a direct response to her art being rejected.

"I took some paintings to a local gallery and they said no, no, no," she adds.<sup>k</sup> That was it. I decided to stop painting. I knew I could make clothes, and thought I could use them as an art form. I was never fixated on money. I wanted to challenge an audience. It was all part of the feminist push then, being on the fringe and looking at creating culture."

From 1978 the little Pye empire expanded. Her work was being sought after for theatre and film. She was the principal designer, and her business partner kept the business running. When they split after five years, she was saddled with an expanding operation.

"I was no longer just a designer and I struggled with that," she says. "I was worn out by it — keeping a large staff, the overheads. It really curbed my designing. It became just a business. You ask yourself questions — will it sell? How much money can we make\*?"

"It was a reckoning time. So I stopped in 1988. I was conned out of a lot by a certain person I was associated with. I was left with nothing but my son, then my husband died. I took time out. Studied Eastern mysticism. Went to India. Spent time with my mother."

"It was a very reflective time. I looked at what I could give rather than what I could get. I thought about virtues, which I'd never done before."

Pye made a conscious decision to reinvent herself and her life.

"I was determined to become a homebody," she says. "I had a



Picture: Glenn Barnes

vision of light. It was Brisbane. I can't tell you why."

She married Steven Hein, a veteran of the fashion industry. Together they formed and ran the Brisbane-based Positive Australia, which manufactured leisure clothing from recycled or natural fibres. Their emphasis was to minimise the environmental impact of textile production.

As for her own creative impulses, they never went away. They just stepped to the forefront once again. Studying textiles one day in India, she understood what had been absent in her life — a love for creating clothes.

"I thought if I had my own shop I could be my own person," she says. "I have the skill. I know my craft. Since opening (in October) I found I really love selling again."

"You laugh, you find out things, you get feedback. It's magical to see people put on clothes. To be able to see that."

At the recent official opening, guests and the public alike were treated to a sidewalk fashion parade on Given Terrace. Inside the store, Pye displayed items of clothing that stretched back to the beginning of her career. Part parade, part art exhibition.

Currently she is developing a new line of clothing. She works in a studio, as a painter or sculptor works in a studio. As for the word "fashion", it doesn't necessarily apply to Katie Pye.

"Fashion is a term that's too coquettish, too recriminating," she says. "I don't subscribe to fashion, to a fashion label. For me clothing is art based. It allows you scope to experiment. I don't follow particular trends."

She clasps her hands on the table. "So at last we come to the end of the story," she says.

Somehow that seems very unlikely.